

I am the Project Co-ordinator at a Music Hub where I have worked for the past 6 years. I am extremely passionate with helping schools provide music opportunities for their students, regardless of where that school is located.

However foremost I am a parent who is keen to support my daughter with her own musical journey.

Why is music so important to me? Why am I so enthusiastic in trying to ensure that children and young people have musical opportunities? Well looking back I attended an exceptionally musical primary school. I didn't know it at the time but it was something that would shape my future.

If you wanted to learn an instrument, you could, if you wanted to join the school band, it was there, along with recorders and singing and all of this was inclusive, free and an everyday part of school life, slap bang in the middle of the council estate where I lived.

When I made the transition to secondary school I was excited to see what bands I could join and what genres of music we would play but unfortunately disappointment set in. Music was not the norm in my secondary school, in fact if you were seen carrying an instrument you were an outcast, a target for bullies and so a couple of months into secondary life I gave up playing - a decision I regret to this day - and I only started playing again when I reached year 11 and had the confidence not to care about what other people thought.

So years later when my 4 year old daughter asked if she could learn to play the piano I excitedly and dutifully searched the internet to see what local lessons I could find for her, only to discover there was nothing, in fact there didn't appear to be any type of private music lessons available close to where we lived and that was troubling to me as a parent. However she was due to start primary school so I assumed, naively, she would soon be immersed in a musical world of singing and playing - as I was at that age.

After visiting the local primary schools we applied for one which had a first access music programme where every child in year 3 was taught the violin for free and then able to continue if they so wished. Music was a focal point in school and we were delighted when she started a couple of months later. Unfortunately though in those few months the head teacher retired and the music coordinator started maternity leave and as a result all music lessons had been stopped, everything, gone. This shows that in the space of a few months a school can change drastically with no warning and us as parents have little say in what happens, or so you would think.

When the music coordinator returned to school she campaigned, with the support of parents, to build music back up in school and now after 7 years there is a full music programme of first access, pathways and specialist lessons, a dedicated music coordinator 3 days a week, 2 choirs and numerous musical opportunities throughout the year - so much so that the school are hoping to become a music specialist academy.

And so on to secondary schools. As a parent I feel that choosing a secondary school is a pivotal point in a child's life, that the next 5 years can determine my daughter's future - will she be happy, inspired, bullied, anxious? There are so many pressures growing up, starting with year 6, a year of intense preparations for SATs, tests upon tests - so much so that my daughter now hates going to the school she once loved and then continuing up into secondary school where GCSEs are taken earlier and earlier.

When we started looking at secondary schools we, as a family, wanted more than the core subjects, we wanted a creative environment where she could escape from the demands of producing high standards of work in English, Maths and Science. In fact when we visited schools we didn't even look at these departments. It appears that every school focuses on these subjects as that is what is expected by the DfE and Ofsted, so we wanted to know - why is that school special? What did they offer in the arts? How would they encourage my daughter to explore her creative side and support her by delivering a well-balanced and broad range of subjects?

We live in an area which is in the top 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country but I have never felt this, we are a caring community that look out for each other's children, we litter pick on a weekly basis and keep an eye on our elderly neighbours. However I felt underprivileged when visiting my local secondary schools. Classes felt soulless and depressing, with strict regimes that replicated a prison. Our 3 local schools are all rated requires improvement or inadequate so we branched out to look at schools in the whole of the surrounding area, including an outstanding secondary school, so hopes were high.

Of the 8 schools we visited and spoke with (including private and other authority schools) I was shocked to discover how music was under represented in the area I live. One school didn't have any music curriculum or teachers (interestingly the one rated outstanding by Ofsted), another had a part time music teacher but they didn't even turn up to the open evening and another informed me that 'classical instrument lessons and choirs were not in demand but if my daughter wanted guitar lessons that could be arranged'. She spoke with me as her full BTEC class of almost 30 students carried on without her - she did confess that she had tirelessly campaigned for another music teacher so there could be 2 classes of 15 which she believed it should be at that level of learning.

I took to the internet to research as many schools as I could and I found it extremely difficult to find music offerings on school websites and no mention at all of after school music clubs anywhere. The schools in my area didn't offer GCSE music or if they did they didn't necessary enter students for those exams. As I looked at schools out of my area I started to realise that there is a clear divide of what was available - but why is this? Is it because where I live when children start secondary school they are deemed to be behind both socially and academically so learning time must be focused on improving these areas? Or is it because parents in more affluent areas expect music to be part of the curriculum and schools know that if they don't provide this there would be an outcry?

Starting secondary school is a daunting and stressful experience for some children and I hear all too often parents say 'we would like to cancel music lessons, just for a few months until they've settled in' but then rarely pick lessons back up. I feel that the links between primary and secondary need to improve dramatically so the transition is smooth and seamless, so that children feel supported and parents don't choose the easy option of cancelling due to not knowing what is available in their new school.

Parents do have a voice but it can be a lone one and I for one don't feel I have another 5 years' worth of fight in me to push a school into building up their music provision and honestly why should I! I am in a privileged position in that I work In a Music Hub and have knowledge that I can use when speaking to schools but this is not the case for many parents, where do they turn when they need support in challenging their school? How do they know what is available and indeed if what their school is offering is above and beyond expected standards?

The bottom line is that I feel like I have let my daughter down by taking her to schools that would have given her EVERYTHING that her creative mind craves only to be told that there is NO point in applying to that school as there is NO chance of being offered a place there. It is heart-breaking to know there are so many children where I live who have no choice in the education that they will receive. That the non-traditional subjects that could enhance their emotional wellbeing and mental health are out of their reach and it's beyond their parent's control.

Music Hubs work tirelessly in fighting the cause for music to be available for EVERY child in EVERY school - but I don't want a token music lesson delivered for one term on a carousel system, I don't want my daughter to be sat colouring in pictures of a violin, I want my daughter to be immersed in a stimulating, musical learning environment that she WOULD receive if she attended a secondary school in a different part of THIS city.

But unfortunately for us the postcode lottery strikes again and we will have to settle for a school that is under immense pressure to achieve unattainable academic results. I just hope that our daughter isn't beaten down by the low expectations, and that she can still thrive and be the compassionate, caring and happy person that we, as parents, hope our children will become.

So what is the answer? How can YOU ensure that EVERY child receives the same fantastic musical, educational experience in secondary school? How can you assist ALL parents and carers with the challenges they face daily in ensuring that their children reach their full musical potential, regardless of where they live and what school they are MADE to attend?

Well I don't have the answers but I do believe that the first step in achieving this is for EVERYONE and I mean EVERYONE in this room to start working together.

The mental wellbeing of a generation is at stake and you can all start to implement the brave changes that will help schools be the kind of place that we ALL want to send our children to.